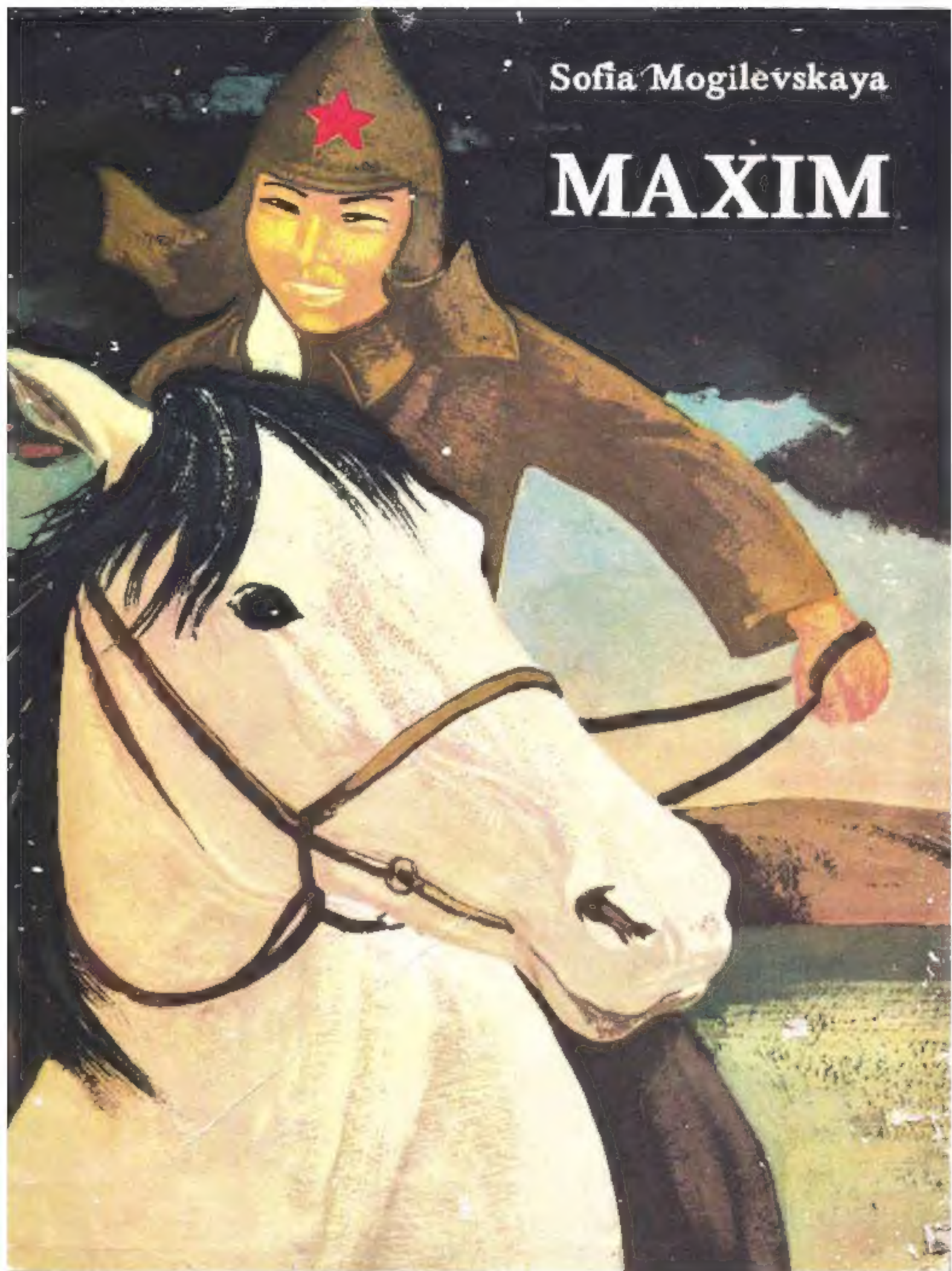


Sofia Mogilevskaya

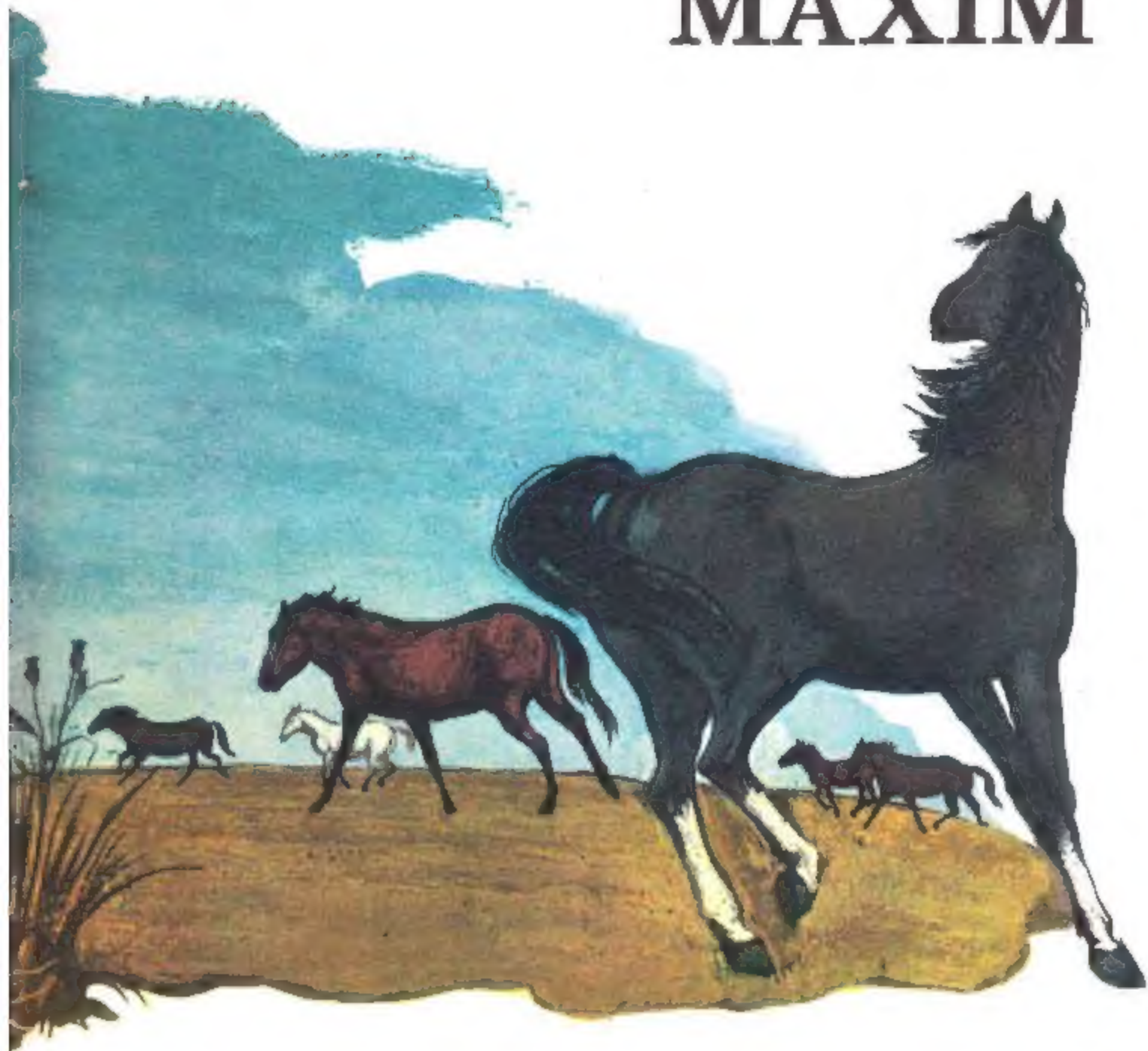
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Sofia Mogilevskaya

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Translated from the Russian by *Jan Butler*

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After Chapayev had been killed, his division retreated to the town of Uralsk for a time. But a month later it started a new offensive, taking large and small villages and lines of fortifications. The Whites fled to the south.

It was late autumn. Low storm clouds hung over the steppe. Rain, mingled with snow, was falling.

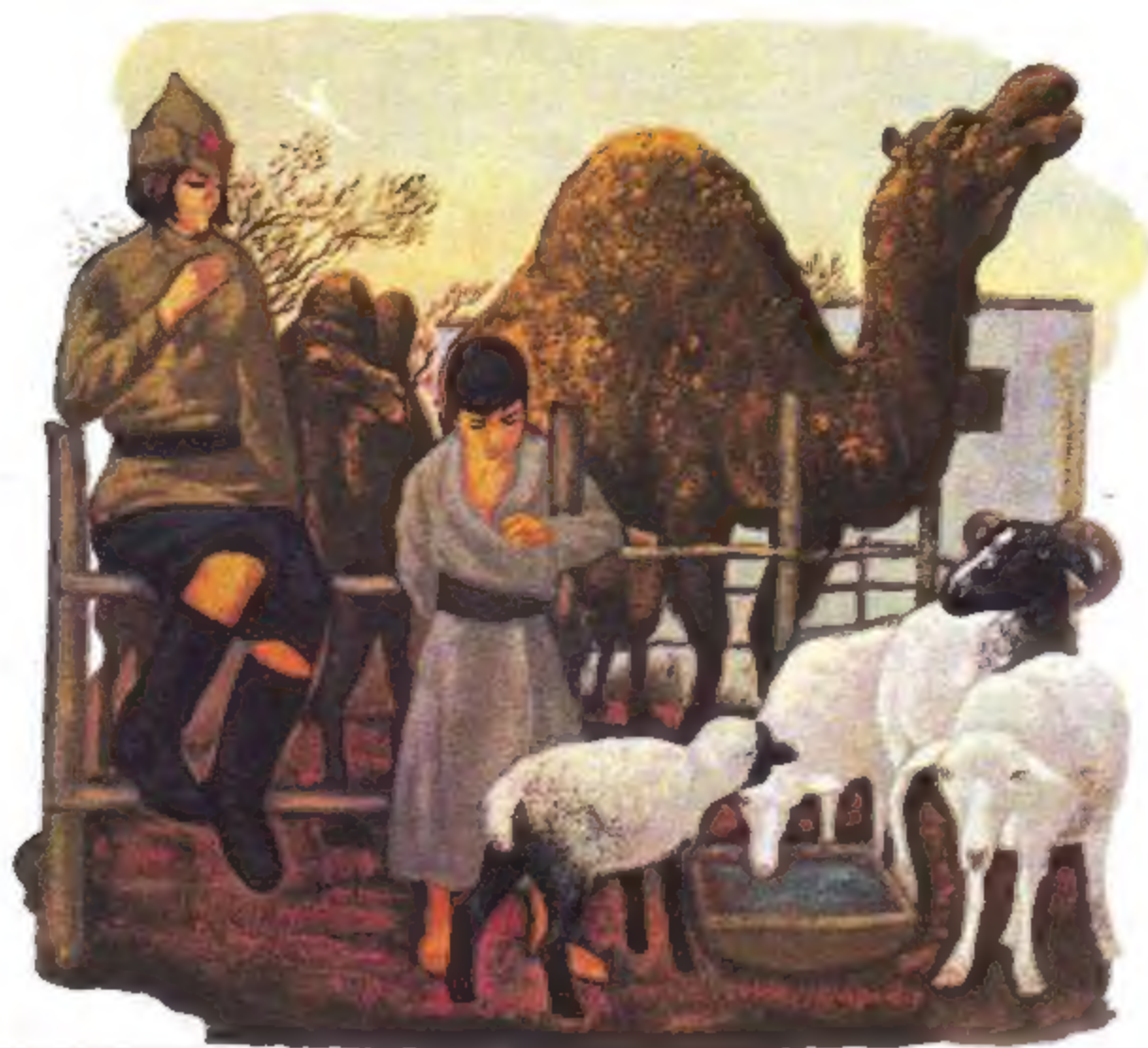
Marusya from Chapayev's division rode ahead with the scouting party. The party stopped for a few days in a small Kirghiz village. The soldiers were billeted in three dugouts and Marusya stayed in the house of a rich Kirghiz. His yard was full of horses, camels and sheep. On the first day Marusya noticed a small boy aged



about eleven in the yard. He was working beyond his powers, dragging huge bales of brushwood, tending to all the draught animals and fetching endless buckets of water. Marusya found out from the neighbours that the boy wasn't related to the rich Kirghiz but had been bought off his poor parents.

"How do you mean 'bought off'?" Marusya didn't understand.

She couldn't imagine how a person, a live person, could be bought!



But she was told that this was a local custom: rich cattlebreeders considered it more profitable to buy a workman than employ him on a temporary basis.

One evening the soldiers gathered round a campfire and began talking about their heroic commander, Chapayev, who had recently been killed.

"Do you remember his favourite song, lads?" young Lesha Novikov suddenly asked and began singing....

He sang a simple, sad song about a black raven. Reaching the highest notes, his soft, crystal-clear voice rang out, carried far into the dark steppe, and almost disappeared.

At first they listened to him in silence, staring at the bright campfire. Then, one by one they began shyly joining in, and the song grew louder and louder.

The flames were dying. Marusya got up and went over to the wattle to fetch some more brushwood.

And then she caught sight of the young serf.

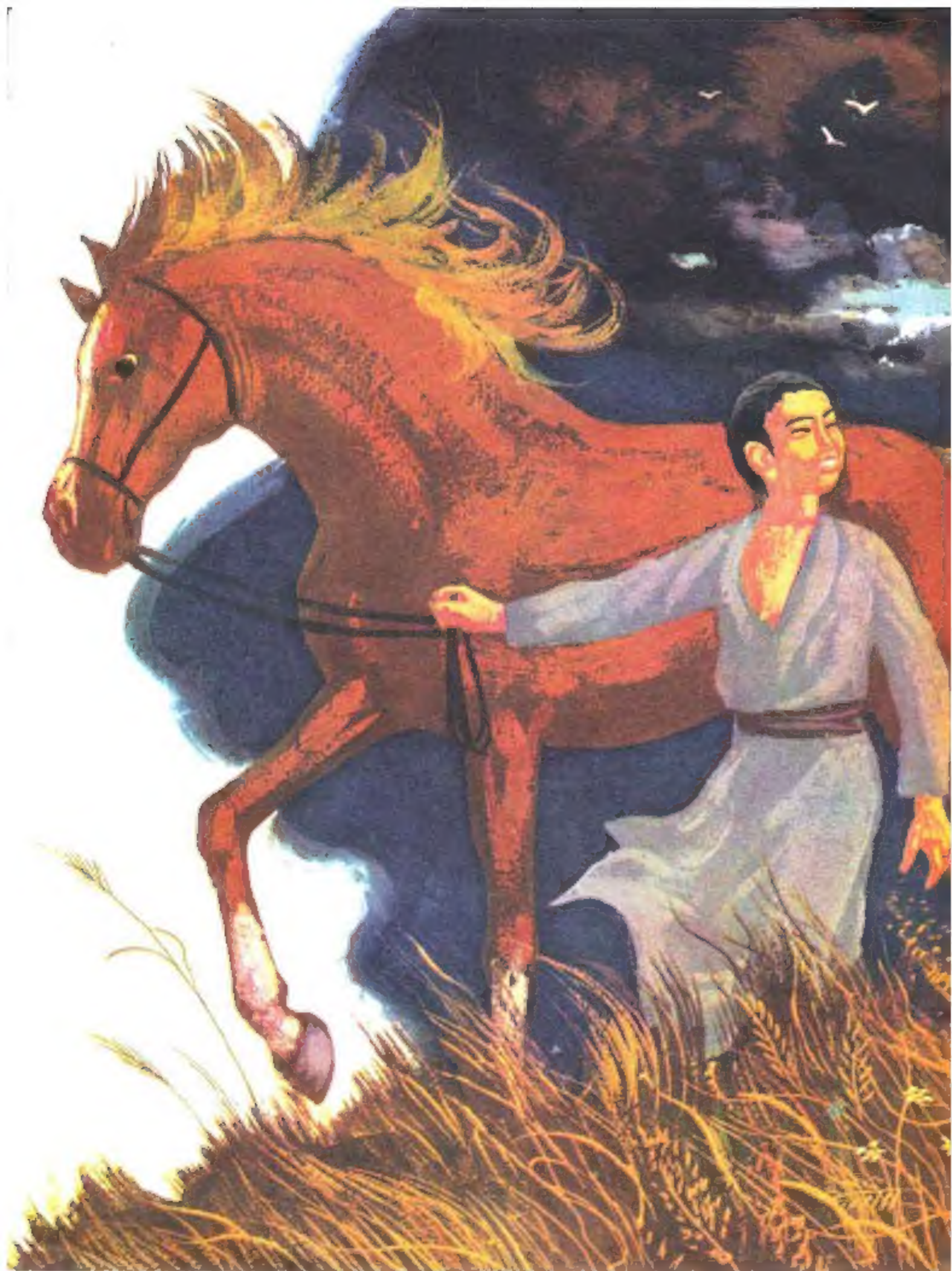
He was standing, huddled against the wattle—small and inconspicuous in his dirty rags. He was listening to the song.

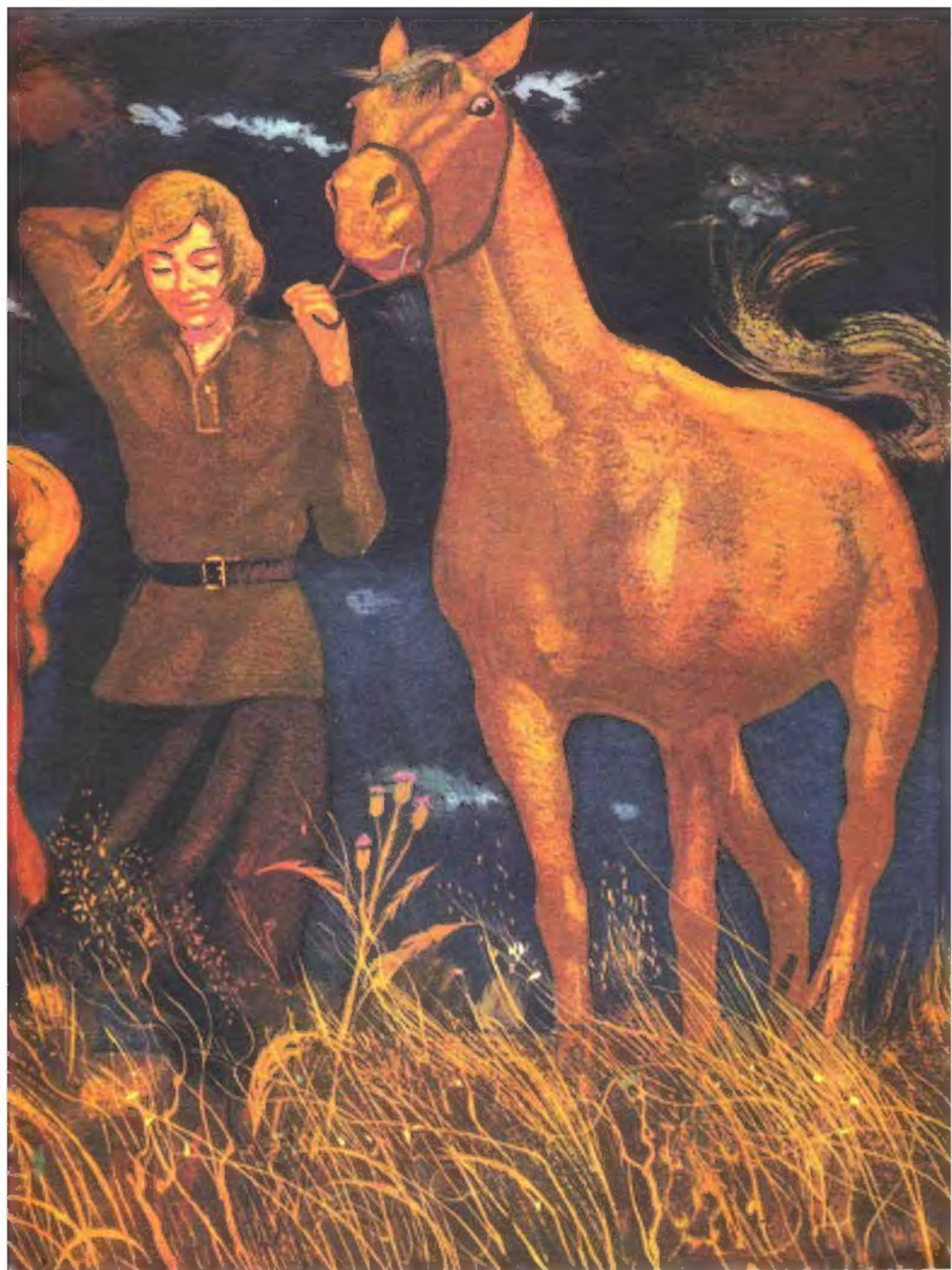
When he noticed Marusya, the boy dashed off in fright but Marusya managed to grab him by the hand.

"What on earth are you frightened of, you silly-billy?" She asked and affectionately stroked his wiry hair. "Come and sit with us. Listen to the songs and have something to eat." She gently drew the boy towards the campfire.

That day marked the beginning of the strange friendship between Chapayev's men and the Kirghiz boy.

In the evenings, when he had finished his hard day's work, the boy would run up to the soldiers and ask them in broken Russian to let him do something for them. He was happy if he was allowed to brush or water a horse. He thought that the only way to express his devotion and love was by working.





A week later the party moved on further. Commander Timofeyev gave the order to mount and the soldiers rode out of the village.

Outside the village a familiar small figure in rags suddenly dashed across the road ahead, almost under the horses' hooves.

The riders stopped and the boy clutched onto the commander's stirrup and began pleading plaintively.

"He wants us to take him along," Marusya said to herself and stopped beside the commander.

"Comrade Timofeyev," she said to him, "let's take the little lad. They'll work him to death here but we'll raise him to be a man."

But the commander flatly refused:

"We can't. If he gets wounded, we'll be to blame. We haven't got the right."

When the detachment moved off, the boy fell down on the road, sobbing. The soldiers galloped past in gloomy silence. The village was already a long way behind, but they still seemed to hear the boy crying bitterly....

They had ridden about three miles when the Commander Timofeyev suddenly reined in his horse.

"Listen here, Marusya," he said to the girl, "gallop back to the village.... What's the matter? Don't you understand? Go and fetch the boy. You were right: we should take him away from his master ... he'll be worked to death there."

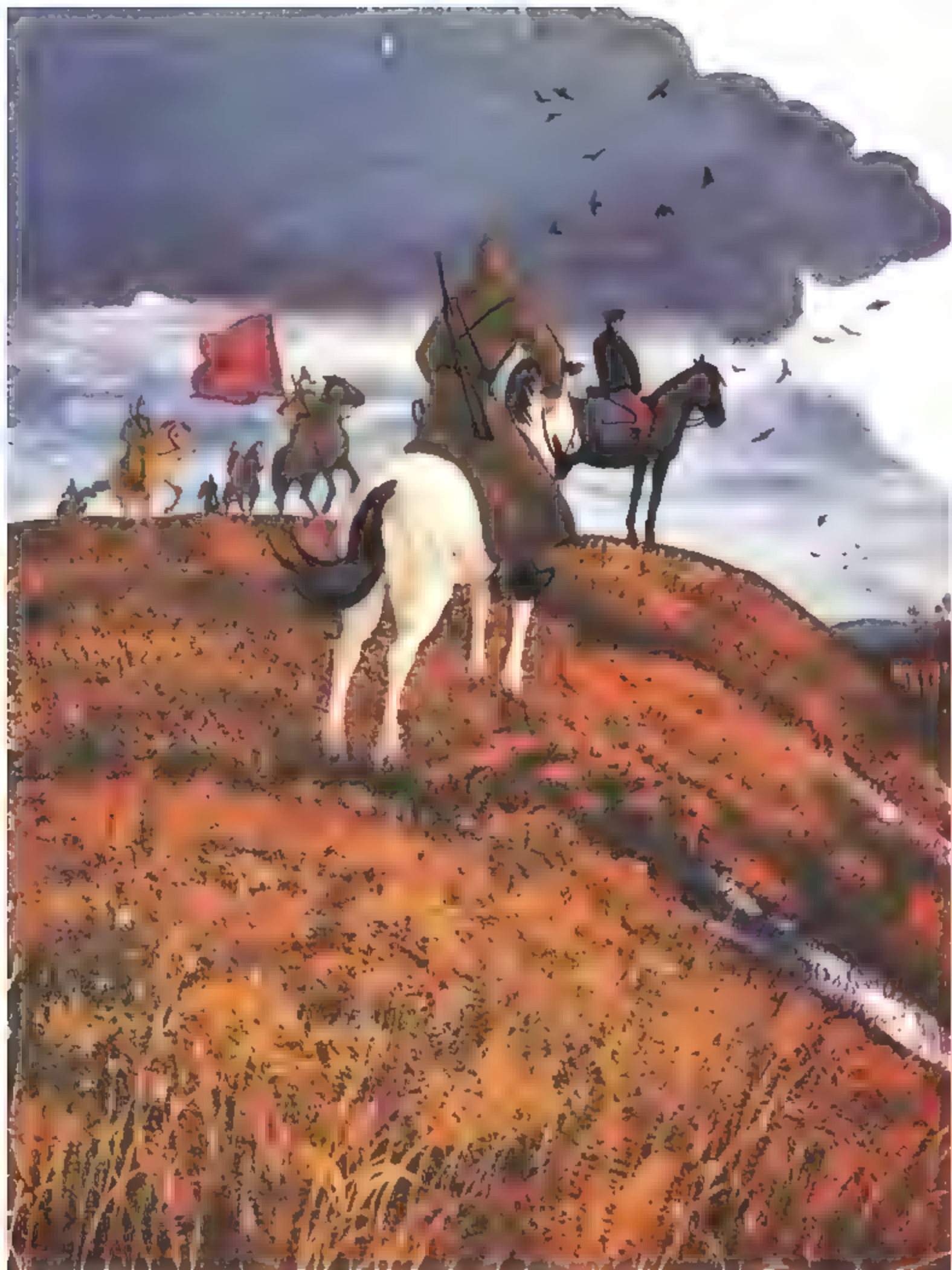
Marusya raced faster than the wind. She galloped through the village straight into the yard belonging to the rich Kirghiz, tied the horse and started searching around for the boy.... He had completely disappeared!

Then she heard some muffled sobs coming from the barn where the lambs were kept. She raced there and saw him sitting

· dismantled the machine-gun, cleaned it and put it back together again. That's not child's play, believe you me. The only trouble is, he doesn't respond to any of the names I've given him. I've tried calling him 'Kolya' but he won't budge. Doesn't take any notice of 'Petya' either."

The battles for Lbishchensk were fierce and hard: the Whites were holding firmly onto the town.





When Chapayev's division drew near the banks of the Ural River, a horde of the enemy's cavalry raced out of the riverside rushes, machine-guns began chirring and cannons boomed from the opposite bank.

Pyotr Prokopievich at full gallop turned the machine-gun cart round to face the enemy.







He had just got ready to fire when a bullet pierced his right arm just below the shoulder. Blood gushed out and his arm became heavy and limp.

The enemy's cavalry was drawing nearer. Chapayev's men could already hear horses snorting and could see the Cossacks' bearded faces.

Commander Timofeyev sent an orderly to Pyotr Prokopievich. "What's the matter? Go on, lay into them!..."

How on earth could he lay into them! He tried to manage the machine-gun with one hand but couldn't. Something had got jammed in the lock, and the machine-gun ribbon would not move.

Then he began speaking to the machine-gun as if it were a person:

"Come on, Maxim lad!.. Don't let me down, old fellow!"

The machine-gun was the Maxim model which was why he called it by that name. Suddenly a voice called out from deep inside the cart where the young Kirghiz boy was sheltering from the bullets.

"Let me have a go."

Pyotr Prokopievich was not even surprised that the boy had responded to the name "Maxim". He moved aside and let the boy lie by the machine-gun and, helping him with his left hand, whispered in a voice that was hoarse with excitement:

"Go on, Maxim lad. Let them have it... That's the stuff!"

Chapayev's men flew across the ice-bound river straight into Lbishchensk. The Whites were still firing from the houses and barns but the town was already in the hands of the Red Army and the soldiers cheered as they captured street after street.

In the evening after the battle the soldiers of the

huddled on the floor in the corner with his face covered by his hands.

"Hey," she called softly.

He started, took his palms away from his face and saw Marusya....

They ran to the horse, hand in hand, hurriedly untied it, mounted and galloped off.



They remained silent all the way. Marusya kept urging the horse on, and the boy shivered and looked over his shoulder all the time: he was afraid his master would come chasing after them. . . .

"Well, laddie." Commander Timofeyev said to him, "you'll be serving in the Red Army, in Chapayev's division, so make sure you don't let us down!"



They found some proper clothes for the boy at the first stopping-place. Somehow they got hold of a shirt and a pair of trousers and Marusya made them smaller. They also found an old army-coat and trimmed its sleeves and hem, and a cloth helmet with a red star. Finding a suitable pair of boots was more difficult as they were all too big for the boy, but they also managed to fit them in the end.



"Now you're a real soldier!" said Marusya, smartening up the young soldier. "But what's your name? We've known each other so long and yet we still don't know your name!"

The boy smiled, fingered his new clothes and replied in broken Russian that he did not have a name.

This was hard to believe. Lesha Novikov, who spoke a few words of Kirghiz, was called for, but no matter how hard he tried, Lesha got no answer to his questions. Either the boy did not have a name or he had forgotten the one he once had and his master did not call him by any name. He simply shouted and swore at him.

"I don't believe it. I just don't believe it," Marusya repeated in amazement. "Horses and dogs have names. . . . But here is a human being who hasn't!"

They decided to hand the boy over to the machine-gun crew to be looked after by Pyotr Prokopievich, an old, revered soldier.

"Find a name for him," said Marusya. "A nice one! The boy has lived so long without a name, he deserves a good one now."

The division was moving towards the town of Lbishchensk where Chapayev had met his death at the beginning of September.

The boy was sitting with Pyotr Prokopievich in one of the machine-gun carts. Less than a month had passed since the soldiers had taken him into their family but he had already changed beyond recognition. His shoulders had broadened, he had grown taller and his eyes looked brighter. The men still kept a keen eye on him. Someone or other was always running over to ask how he was and to bring him a bite to eat.

"The lad's getting along fine. He's a bright chap, too," Pyotr Prokopievich praised his ward. "Just now he's

cavalry reconnaissance went to congratulate their ward on his first battle.

"Want to see my Maxim?" Pyotr Prokopievich asked as he greeted his guests on the porch of the house where they were billeted.

"Which Maxim?" Marusya asked.

"Maxim boy, come here, lad!" Pyotr Prokopievich called.



And the little dark-eyed Kirghiz boy came out onto the porch, confused and smiling. Now he not only had some real comrades-in-arms but a good name, which he had earned honorably in the battle for Soviet power.



